

RE: H. B. No. 5672 AN ACT EXPANDING INSURANCE COVERAGE FOR HEARING AIDS FOR CHILDREN

Good Morning Mr. Chairman(s) and Committee Members,

I am currently the President of the Connecticut Academy of Audiology speaking on behalf of our members in support of HB5672. This act would expand our current state statute that mandates a minimum \$1000 benefit for hearing aids for children 12 and under to *also include ages 13 to 18*. This will mark the third legislative session in a row that a similar bill has been raised, speaking to the strong interest the CT community has in closing the coverage gap for teens. Children from ages 13 to 18 have been historically an underserved and overlooked population in our state. No other state that mandates hearing aid coverage ignores the adolescent years. The State of Connecticut was one of the first in the country to mandate universal hearing screenings for newborns. This was done because the importance of early identification and treatment of hearing loss was recognized. Why are we dropping the ball with our teens? Untreated hearing loss results in a child's reduced ability to learn, interact with friends and family, and can result in withdrawal and social isolation. Ultimately untreated hearing loss can result in a reduced ability to be a productive member of society.

Three in every 1000 children have hearing loss affecting approximately 2,617 of the 872,313 children in Connecticut. (Reference: 2007 Connecticut population census relative to the Better Hearing Institute statistics on hearing loss). The life expectancy of a hearing aid for a child is 3 to 5 years. It is therefore reasonable to assume that a hearing impaired child would need to have their hearing aids replaced during their adolescence.

Currently, in Connecticut full funding for hearing aids for children less than three years of age comes from our state funded Birth-to-Three program. Full funding is also available for children of all ages who are eligible for Medicaid, Husky A and Husky Plus. Partial funding may be available through Title V (CT Lifespan Respite Coalition) for families that meet strict income guidelines (was 300% poverty level or less). Those families who are not eligible for these programs must use personal funds to purchase hearing aids for their children.

The proposed \$1000 benefit, although small relative to the average \$3000-\$6000 cost of a pair of digital hearing aids typically recommended for children, would be very helpful to families, and could make the difference of having vs. not having needed hearing aids. The Academy supports expanding the current statute to include children 18 and under. The committee should also be reminded that currently self-funded or out of state administrated companies are exempt from this mandate, already limiting access to many children under 12. Unless this federal loophole is closed this would also limit access to our teens should this bill pass.

Any bill that seeks to expand coverage for hearing aids for children is generally well received by both audiologists and the patients we serve. Assistance that encourages parents to seek help for their hearing impaired children is viewed as positive.

On behalf of the members of the CT Academy of Audiology I thank you for the opportunity to express our position on this important issue. If the Academy can in any way provide you with additional information on hearing loss and hearing aids, please feel free to contact us. Thank you for your time.

Cathleen A. Alex, Au.D.
President Connecticut Academy of Audiology